National College for
School Leadership

Research Associate Summary Report

Heidi Swidenbank, Vice Principal, West London Academy, Northolt

The challenges and opportunities of leading and managing an all-age school

Summer 2007

Introduction

While there has been a tradition of all-age schooling within the private sector it has not, until recently, been typical in state schools. However, there appears to be a growing trend in which all-age schools have become more popular.

The concept of all-age schools is still relatively new. The definition states that an all-age school is defined as a school that comprises of multiple phases (usually primary and secondary) in a single institution.

The research aims to:

1. Share the experiences of those leading all-age schools.

2. Identify the opportunities and challenges that these leaders face.

3. Focus on how leadership has evolved as the organisation has developed.

4. Make recommendations to existing and future leaders to support the sharing of good practice.

Methodology

Factors which influenced the research project included:

1. The lack of any previous research on all-age schools in Britain and the small number of internationally based research projects.

2. The small number of established all-age schools, in the public sector in Britain.

3. The lack of research on student achievement and outcomes in all-age schools as they are still relatively new (Gray, Ruddock and Doddington, emails, Feb 2007).

As a consequence, a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders from four out of the five all-age, single institution, state schools in Britain, were carried out.

The schools and their context

The four schools which participated in the interview process varied considerably in terms of their context and their socio-economic make up. The only one common factor is that they are or had been one single institution that educated both primary and secondary school-age children.

Leadership and management – the opportunities

All of the leaders interviewed, without exception, talked about the positive experiences and opportunities they have had as leaders of all-age schools.

These opportunities fall into five main categories:

1. To be part of something new and exciting.

2. To have the ability to change and develop as a leader which in turn promotes distributed leadership.

3. To reduce the barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases.

4. To improve personal development and well-being of students and to gain a greater understanding of the community.

5. To gain greater value for money through economies of scale.

Leadership and management – the challenges

Throughout the interview process, leaders were asked to comment on the challenges that they had experienced as a result of leading in an all-age school.

These challenges included:

1. Changing the culture and addressing the context and the history of the school.

2. Changing perceptions about what it means to be a primary or a secondary school teacher.

3. Time pressures and facilities.

Recommendations

Various strategies and approaches have been used to address the challenges that the leaders faced. These have included:

■ Ensuring a stepped and systematic approach to change.

■ Creating a shared vision, understanding and developing people.

■ Respecting diversity as well as the commonalities and being a role model for change.

■ Allowing space and time for the school to evolve.

■ Having a sense of passion.

The school leaders also offered suggestions about how to further support integration and transition across the primary and secondary phases as well as sharing their organisational structure for their senior leadership teams.

Activities to support integration and transition

■ Adapt the Year 7 curriculum and base it around a traditional primary model. For example, having 'home teachers' who teach the Year 7 students the majority of the time or introducing curriculum models based around themes such as those outlined in the RSA Opening Minds projects.

■ Set up tracking and assessment systems which go across the two phases.

■ Be aware of correspondences and communications – adapt them accordingly. For example, newsletters and website pages for primary age students need to be different than those aimed at secondary aged children.

■ Develop opportunities for joint planning and team teaching across the two phases.

■ Set up joint monitoring systems such as 'book looks', work sampling, standardisation of writing or art work.

■ Create key appointments which work across the two phases such as attendance officers, teachers who must develop learning and teaching across both primary and secondary.

■ Ensure team-building events occur for the children, the staff and the parents.

■ Establish one communication system to ease the information flow and to keep everyone in the loop. For example, one email or telephone system.

■ Create a common identity through uniform, logos, letterheads.

■ Set up buddying systems for students and staff across the age range.

- Deliver professional development programmes. For example, training on how to lead change, develop writing or observing lessons is appropriate for primary and secondary staff.

- Take advantage of the opportunities that extended schools can offer such as parenting classes.

- Collapse timetables occasionally and allow for flexibility.

- Be aware of the impact of timings of the school day for parents and students.

- Challenge institutions – without challenge the all-age SEF would not have been produced.

Conclusion

The research highlighted both the opportunities and the challenges that these leaders experienced.

The opportunities identified included:

- being able to be part of something new and exciting.

- being allowed to develop further as a leader and promoting distributed leadership

- reducing barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases

The challenges that the leaders experienced centred around:

- bringing about cultural change

- addressing historical problems

- changing the perceptions regarding what primary and secondary education means

All of the leaders were able to offer practical examples of how to improve integration and transition within the all-age context, some of which can be used outside of these setting.

In addition, the leaders offered sound advice about how to manage change:

- ensure a stepped approach to change

- create a shared vision and understanding

- develop people

- have the energy, enthusiasm and passion to make it work

References

The Innovation Unit, 2007, *All-Age Schooling: A Resource*, page 4, London.

http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/projects/current-projects/all-age-schooling.html

Research associate reports available in Summer 2007

- **Picturing preferred futures**
  Using case studies to investigate solution-focused approaches to school improvement
  Neil Birch, *Headteacher, Highview School, Folkestone*

- **One step ahead of the game**
  Leading change in ICT in support of pupil learning
  Ann Gill, *Headteacher, Rode Heath Primary School, Cheshire*

- **Ringing the changes**
  The middle leader's role in leading change
  Elizabeth Moore, *Deputy Headteacher, Hertfordshire and Essex High School, Hertfordshire*

- **Children's voice, children's rights**
  What children with special needs have to say about their variously inclusive schools
  Helen Bishton, *Director Corley Centre*

- **Long lasting success**
  Creating strategic and sustainable primary schools
  Alan Thomas, *NCSL Research Associate, Headteacher, Hetton Lyons Primary School, Sunderland*

- **Exploring the links between performance management and improved standards**
  Haydn Evans, *Headteacher, Sir John Cass's Foundation Redcoat CE Secondary School, Stepney*

Research Associate Programme

To download this publication, please visit
www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:
www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

Printed on environmentally friendly paper

Disclaimer
In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.